RAPPIN', PIMPIN', AND WOOFIN'

BLACK ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO RACIAL SEPARATENESS

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CHAPTER ONE

BLACK ENGLISH:

AN OVERVIEW OF SELECTED ISSUES

"What it is! What it is!"

"That cat name Shaft is a bad mother--" "Hush you mouf!"

"Can't nobody never do nothin in Mr. Smith class."

"Least my momma don't buy her furniture from the Good Will!"

"I come here today to testify what the Lord done did for me."

"It bees dat way sometime."

What it is! What is it? It is the voice of Black America, variously labeled Black English, Black Dialect, Black Idiom, or recently Ebonics" (Smitherman, 1977:1).

This study is a look at the state of Black English today. It intends to support the theory that the endurance of Black English vernacular attests to a continued and growing racial separation in this country. This study will examine four major points in support of this theory. They are first, that Black English has a structural base; second, that Black English also has a cultural base; third, the endurance of Black English is related to socioeconomic level; and fourth, that Black English is a consciously maintained dialect and language that serves as a buffer against the majority population.

These will then be examined in further detail within the context of three unique communication styles as displayed in

the black adolescent community. This indepth look at rap, body language and ritual insults will make up the bulk of this study.

For clarity, it is appropriate to distinguish between the terms structural and cultural as they relate to this paper. Structure refers to social relations networks and the status structure they define, while culture refers to a system of shared beliefs and orientations that function as behaviour standards (Blau and Scott, cited in Zinn, 1982:264).

In researching this work, a variety of sources were used. In addition to both social science and popular literature references, there is a significant amount of information gathered through the personal observation of black adolescents included here as well.

Since reference will often be made to Black English as it relates to Standard English, some discussion of how a language is standardized is in order here. Basically, a language variety is said to be standardized if a set of norms defining "correct" usage has been codified and accepted within a speech community. Typically, these codified norms are available in the form of dictionaries, grammars, style manuals, etc. The acceptance of the codified language form is normally advanced by the power elite of the society and is confirmed through the social institutions such as the government, schools, and the mass media (Ryan and Giles, 1982:3). In addition, a standard language generally has the broadest range of social utility. It is likely to be used by its speaker in most situations

including living, working and recreational domains.

Nonstandard dialects, in this case Black English, exhibit a more limited usage and are restricted to fewer domains, such as the living and recreational settings. In addition, variant languages that have a history solely residing in the oral mode are less likely to become standard than are those which are preserved in written form.

Two other aspects of standardization concern the autonomy and historical roots of language varieties. Concerning the historical background of language, it has been important for the status of Black English to trace its roots to Africa rather than to emphasize its development within the setting of American slavery (Dillard as cited in Ryan and Giles, 1982:4).

In order to examine black American dialects with the clearest possible focus, let us first consider certain historical parallels to another nonstandard English dialect. Cockney has been spoken by the lower working classes in London for centuries. The upper classes in England, on the other hand, speak a standard dialect known as received pronunciation. Through the years, Cockney has survived in the face of sporadic abandonment and various social pressures, but the dialect endures as a testament to the cohesion and survival of the Cockney speech community (Baugh, 1983:1-2).

In this country, most people consider the Black dialect to be the speech of the lower classes and take it as an indication of substandard intelligence and/or education. Historically, advocates of white supremacy have painted "Negro speech" as

definitive evidence of the intellectual inferiority of blacks (Baugh, 1983:11).

Most research in the last twenty years, however, rather convincingly supports the theory that Black English has its roots in West Africa and is in reality a creolized version of that ancient tongue. This creolist theory is very popular among many scholars because it provides supportive evidence that reinforces black pride and nationalism; moreover, the creole position emphatically views black speech as being different from Standard English - not inferior (Baugh, 1983:12). In what Black linguist Dr. Grace Holt calls our "semantics of inversion," black people have retained a feature of Mandingo, Ibo, Yoruba, Wolof, and other African languages. For example, the Black English pronunciation of "mo" instead of "more" reflects those African languages that do not have an "r" sound. These and other surviving Africanisms - such as the absence of the "th" sound - help to reconstruct how Black English developed in the American slave community (Smitherman, "Black English: So Good It's 'Bad'", in Essence , 1981:154).

But the most important finding of all this research has been that Black English is just as logical and ordered as any other English dialect, in spite of the fact that it is commonly viewed by white speakers as being somehow inferior, deformed, or limited (Daniels, 1983:68).

Like any other language, Black English is primarily composed of three elements: lexicon, syntax and phonology. Also like any other language, the black dialect operates by rules: it is

not a random, sloppy imitation of some other dialect, but the manifestation of a set of systematically contrasting, equally logical language rules (Daniels, 1983:154).

BLACK ENGLISH: STRUCTURAL ISSUES

It is safe to say that to a great extent, the denigration of Black English is due to a history of racism in this country. Also, it is entirely possible that the racism that lingers today has been born from the stereotypes and prejudices that were imposed - although centuries ago - to keep the races apart.

Strong assimilatory forces have been at work and in some contexts are becoming stronger, so that in many instances blacks may speak to all intents and purposes the same way as their neighbors. Just as complete linguistic assimilation takes place with immigrant groups, so it can and does with blacks. Several historical events have reinforced the tendency to differ. One was the early use of English-based pidgins and creoles among slave populations. This had a tremendous effect on the kind of English which black Americans have come to speak in varieties of speech which have been called Black English Vernacular (Ferguson and Heath, 1981:92).

Black slaves coming to this new world were systematically isolated from other speakers of their native language. Slave traders engaged in this practice, thereby deliberately planning the death of African languages, to restrict possible uprisings during the Atlantic crossing. By contrast, most white immigrants - although poor - were able to keep the language of

their homeland until their children or grandchildren learned English as their native language. Slaves, on the other hand, did not have the advantage - and the communicative luxury - of being able to use their mother tongue. This linguistic isolation is unique to American blacks. With the possible exception of Hawaiian natives, no other American minority has faced this type of linguistic isolation through involuntary capture (Baugh, 1983:13-14).

So while slavery is an obvious structural determinant in the dialect we know as Black English today, it is also interesting to reflect on the way a language restriction can be used as a mental weapon. Because an individual's language is intricately bound up with his or her sense of identity and group consciousness, it is clearly understandable why historically the conqueror forced his victim to learn his language. As black psychiatrist Frantz Fanon said, "Every dialect is a way of thinking." Among colonized people, the colonizer's language and culture is considered superior to the colonized - even by the oppressed themselves. (America's history of being a British colony may explain why British English is considered prestigious here) (Fanon cited in Smitherman, 1977:171).

Black English continues as a result of a tradition of white supremacy in America. In large measure, the ideology of white supremacy was built on a language base. For example, early attempts to measure intelligence included such tasks as reaction time and memory, where African-American performance exceeded that of European-Americans. These tests were dropped

from intelligence measurement batteries. The tests of "intelligence" that emerged were built on the one thing European-Americans would almost always have as an advantage over others - their mother tongue. This is how the mental measurement deck has been stacked. To a great extent, "standard" English skills and thinking skills were and are seen as synonymous (Hilliard, "Psychological Language Factors for African-American Children", in The Education Digest , 1983:54). As a result we arrive at the present situation in regard to black speech wherein there is regional tolerance for variance in white speech as long as there are no economic consequences. But black street speech has been stained with the folk mythology that equates it with illiteracy, poverty, and other trappings of prejudicial isolation (Baugh, 1983:20).

Another powerful historical event was the great migration to the North from the South in the early twentieth century. Slum areas of major cities absorbed thousands of blacks between 1900-1914.

Explicit geographical boundaries were reinforced by explicit social boundaries in recreation, worship and education. There were limited contacts between the diverse ethnic groups of the cities. The restricted social environment of blacks fostered continuation of features of black speech brought from the South and promoted the development of linguistic traits distinctive to urban life. The absence of sustained social and cultural contact with mainstream America created a linguistic situation in which black speech was relatively free from white American

English influences (Ferguson and Heath, 1981:93).

The isolation of black people in large urban ghettos contributes in no small way to the perpetuation of the Black English dialect. According to William Labov, "Language is telling us what we already know. Inner-city blacks are remote from the centers of power, divorced from the community, so remote that they don't even make a claim to local rights and privileges" (Quinn, "Linguistic Segregation", in The Nation , 1985:479-482).

In Philadelphia and other big cities, Labov says, increasingly large numbers of black children in urban ghettos never meet any whites before going to school. "We're heading toward cities that are half black and half white, with very little communication between the two." He further cites that the different uses of language between the races have the effect of "locking" blacks out of "important networks that lead to jobs, housing and basic rights and privileges" (Williams, "Black-white Language Gap Called Danger to Society", in The Flint Journal , 1986:A1).

The oral tradition that is the foundation of Black English is also a structural handicap when we compare white and black historical language beginnings. Whereas most European immigrants came to American from a homeland with a strong written tradition, African slaves were taken from a land where elders memorized oral histories. This fact was detailed in Alex Haley's Roots, and while it is a certain source of pride to that author, it is, as was pointed out earlier,

linguistically stifling in terms of language status.

In attempting to validate the structural basis for Black English, a fairly convincing hypothesis was encountered for the endurance of the white Southern dialect. There is quite a case to be made for that accent to have been greatly influenced by Black English. Consider that the Southern dialect survives in this country geographically in what were the Confederate States. The theory holds that because black mammies and black playchildren were primary contacts for the children of white slave masters, they communicated their accent to these children. In fact, young men were often sent away to England or to the North to improve their speech. Young women, who weren't considered worth educating, stayed home and thus retained a thicker accent. Upon visiting the American South, Charles Dickens was to remark that white women spoke exactly like the blacks (McCrum, Cran and MacNeil, "The Story of English", in PBS TV pres., 1986).

BLACK ENGLISH: CULTURAL ISSUES

The roots of today's Black English reside in West Africa where many languages, 160 in all, are spoken along the rivers. Most people there use a pidgin language from which English creole was derived when the slaves were thrown together without a common speech mode. The middle passage carried this language across the Atlantic. Many slaves were dumped in the West Indies where a West Indian patois related to American Gullah survives today.

Known also as Geechee or Sea Island Creole, Gullah is

indigenous to the coastal South Carolina strip between Charlestown and Beaufort, where the early colony's rice plantations existed in the 1700s. Some scholars argue for an earlier origin on the upper Guinea Coast of West Africa before the colonial settlement of South Carolina, maintaining that Gullah was brought to the colony as a fully developed creole rather than as a pidgin.

In phonology, there are similarities between the vowels of Gullah and those of certain West African languages, which are almost certainly the ones serving as source languages for the pidgin ancestor of Gullah (Ferguson and Heath, 1981:73).

It is the specific language of the Sea Islands. One-quarter million blacks lived on these islands virtually cut off from the mainland until World War I. Their language had remained therefore unchanged for 300 years. It was the language of the plantations. It maintained African inflection patterns and grammatical rules and became the basis for Black English in America.

This pidgin, or language of transaction, which the slaves developed involved the substitution of English for West African language patterns. For example, West African allows for sentence construction without a form of the verb "to be." Sentence patterns, without any form of the verb "be," can frequently be heard in virtually any modern-day black community (Smitherman, 1977:5-6).

So while current researchers generally agree that both structural and functional patterns have their roots in African

traditional culture and in the social adjustments of the slave trade, and that they have taken their distinctive form in the evolution of black American culture and social organization in both urban and rural New World settings, the more interesting question is how much remained of their African mother tongues?

Africanisms persisted...some are still apparent in varieties of Black English, and a few have even entered the mainstream of American English. A number of scholars agree that Gullah is not an aberrant phenomenon of Afro-American language, but rather a remnant of speech situations which were probably widespread in the early days of slavery. There is little doubt that the language of black Americans did and still does, to an extent, reflect aspects of the West African languages (Ferguson and Heath, 1981:104-105).

There are, however, crucial differences in American culture with regards to the contrasting modes in which black and white Americans have shaped their language - a written mode for whites, having come from a European, print-oriented culture; a spoken mode for blacks, having come from an African, orally-oriented background.

In considering the question of how this dialectic language survives culturally, it is interesting to note that language and the dialect in which it was learned, is acquired by around age two. It is pretty firmly fixed by about age five or six, and by adolescence the basic speech patterns have become a well ingrained habit. At that point language and dialect are nearly impossible to change - and one has to be willing to surrender

whole chunks of one's identity to do so (Smitherman, 1977:169).

Cultural values play an integral role in perpetuation of languages - especially nonstandard varieties. For a less prestigious language to be maintained, it must be associated with values that its speakers see as positive and with which they wish to identify. As a result of the Black Power Movement, the ingroup values of Black English in the United States today are well recognized. Blacks are perhaps less willing now than thirty years ago to give up their dialect (Ryan and Giles, 1982:64). James Baldwin once defended Black English by saying it had added "vitality to the language", and even went so far as to label it a language in its own right, saying, "Language (i.e. Black English) is a political instrument" and a "vivid and crucial key to identity" (Jones, "What's Wrong With Black English", in Newsweek, 1982:7).

In order to be successful by society's standards today it is necessary for blacks to be conversant in Standard English. Those middle class blacks who are in this category have, for the most part, mastered the skill of code switching. This refers to the ability to use one dialect and speech mode in the workplace and to relax back into another at home or recreation. These blacks have the dual advantage of meeting the required speech of professional transactions while retaining the intimate language of home and friends. More specifically, there are rules for the use of the two codes: nonstandard Black English is considered appropriate for speaking and listening, but not for reading and writing, and for informal but not

formal contexts. Also, that standard Black English seems to be acceptable for most occasions (Ryan and Giles, 1982:129).

While language acquisition is subject to influences in our environment, they are not always the influences we might think. According to William Labov, "Our basic language system is not acquired from schoolteachers or from radio announcers, but from friends and competitors: those we admire and those we have to be good enough to beat." Labov further discovered that sound changes are initiated by the highest-status speakers of their group - and the rate at which other people acquire them is directly proportional to their own upward or downward social mobility (Quinn, "Linguistic Segregation" in The Nation 1985:479-482).

We identify speakers of different languages primarily by their "accent." These sound patterns are set in our childhood and so deeply ingrained that, for most people, they are not subject to complete change after adolescence. Black English has certain sound patterns that differ from those of other varieties of English, and these patterns are often recognizable even when a speaker's lexicon and syntax reveal no Black English features (Daniels, 1983:159).

Like Cockney, it seems that black street speech will survive - in one form or another - for years to come. The emphasis may continue on the acquisition of new skills but that does not imply the rejection or abandonment of the intimate colloquial linguistic norms that most black people find most comfortable.

After all, there are churches which are in large measure at

the heart of the black community. The language is maintained there in the form of age-old ritual responses and the spirituals, both of which are still used in West Africa today.

ENDURANCE OF BLACK ENGLISH IS RELATED TO SOCIOECONOMIC LEVEL

Dialects do not attach themselves to skin colors, but judgments about African ancestry do, says Black English linguistic specialist, J.L. Dillard. Black Americans of a certain socioeconomic group - not all blacks - speak the dialect described in this study.

"Current research shows that status assignment according to language affects citizens of the United States. The black speaker of nonstandard English suffers much more than the black speaker of Standard English. What rubs salt in the wound is that the speaker of nonstandard English is usually much poorer" (Dillard, 1973:11).

A large majority of American blacks reside in a low socioeconomic stratum. Unfortunately, much of the reason for that is a national history of racism. According to William Labov, "It's not just some heritage of our terrible past, and it's not disappearing. It's being created right now. There's a growing black middle class, we know. But the number of blacks who are isolated and poor is greater than ever - blacks who never see a white except as teacher or cop, or a performer on radio or television. Most blacks and most whites in this society are growing further and further apart" (Quinn, 1985:479-482).

In a further attack on the racism Labov refers to, Jim

Quinn, writing in The Nation (Sept. 1985), labels it "elitism." He says, "The attack on Black English is part of a strategy to convince the 'lower classes' that they are disqualified by the way they speak from ever rising above their station. It is amazing that those who want to stamp out Black English can pose as condescending friends of blacks, when what they are doing is erecting one more barrier to equality."

The educational system gets involved in the labeling of black speech as lower-class when it puts forth what is known as "deficit theory." This theory holds that language problems of black children in schools in Eastern cities are the result of something traceable to the slum environment. However, according to J.L. Dillard (1977), "Ghetto dialect in the Northeast United States has much in common with creole in the Caribbean Islands! It is hard to see just what environmental cause might be invoked."

It remains a fact though, that high language corresponds to status, high culture, and strong aspirations toward upward social mobility, while low language is associated with solidarity, comradeship and intimacy by its speakers. Some ethnic groups are mainly concentrated within narrow social-class boundaries, and as a result, their language varieties are often equated with that social class. This accounts for the current lack of concensus on Black English since it is often classified as a low language due mainly to the low socioeconomic level of a majority of its speakers.

In fact, the language is spoken at various times by some

ninety percent of the black community - regardless of socioeconomic status - including poets and professors, entertainers and elites, reverends and revolutionaries. The difference between black "leaders" or the black "middle class" and the black "underclass" is that leaders and the middle class can shift to white English when the situation calls for it. Thus, this group commands two languages, while the "underclass" is fluent in only one (Smitherman, in Essence 1981:154).

It is appropriate to look at the immigrant status of language in this country as it may or may not apply to blacks. While many non-blacks consider poverty to be a common point of social entry, poverty alone does not reflect the special barriers that blacks have faced considering their unique linguistic history. Most white immigrants came to America from societies with a long-standing written tradition, and they were able to maintain the language of their homeland until future generations - learning local Standard English and acquiring their education in white schools - were able to enter society on a competitive footing. Descendants of slaves, on the other hand, by virtue of being denied the use of their African tongue, were forced to use a pidginized English. Add the historical fact that it was illegal to teach slaves to read and write, and the likelihood of access to the linguistic mainstream diminishes rapidly (Baugh, 1983:29-30).

BLACK ENGLISH IS A CONSCIOUSLY MAINTAINED DIALECT AND LANGUAGE SERVING AS A BUFFER AGAINST THE MAJORITY POPULATION

The notion of a black code-speech of sorts dates back to

slavery when deliberately refusing to accept and assimilate the language of the white enslavers/captors was simply another means of adding to the "troublesome property concept" (Stampp as cited in Twiggs, 1973:27). A correlating possibility to account for enduring pronunciational difference is that the use of double entendre in which there is, even today, and was during slavery a constant, deliberate double-language usage, involving a word code system which only blacks understood (Twiggs, 1973:28).

In universal psychological justification for this phenomenon, Janet Lukens states that there is that "tendency for speakers to use their ingroup language in the presence of outgroup members who are unfamiliar with it. Through their use of the ingroup language in the latter's presence, ingroup members may counteract the communicative distances already established by the outgroup." She further adds that "the emphasis of a distinctly black speech style in interracial encounters may result from their desire to distance themselves from whites" (Lukens, 1979:154-5).

Beginning, then, with an obstinate and proud refusal to learn English, or at least to learn it properly, it is logical that Black English endures today as an identifying characteristic. It cannot be denied that black American vernacular has given birth to a speech form, even a literature, which is distinct from that of the dominant culture. It is a language the group recognizes as its own and in which it expresses its collective consciousness.

It was thanks to the fertility of their gestural "motor" memory that these Africans, plunged into a European/Protestant environment which effaced their residual "image" memory, were able to structure the experience they were obliged to live out in the concentration-camp world of slavery, then in a state of serfdom dosed with lynchings and, finally, in the racist urban ghettos (Balmir, "Black English", in UNESCO Courier, 1983:11).

It is important here to realize that a language is not just an asset of a culture or group, but of individual human beings. Our native language is the speech of our parents, siblings, friends and community. It is the code we use to communicate in the most powerful and intimate experiences of our lives. It is a central part of our personality, an expression and a mirror of what we are and wish to be. Our language is as personal and as integral to each of us as our bodies and our brains, and in our own unique ways, we all treasure it (Daniels, 1983:78).

Further support for the notion of Black English as an identifier is offered by Rachel L. Jones, writing in Newsweek, Dec. 27, 1982, when she states, "I know from experience that it's important for black people, stripped of culture and heritage, to have something they can point to and say, 'This is ours, WE can comprehend it, WE alone can speak it with a soulful flourish.'"

Both in slavery and now, the black community places a high value on the spoken word. From a black perspective, written documents are limited in what they can teach about life and survival in the world. Aside from athletes and entertainers,

only those blacks who can perform stunning feats of oral gymnastics become culture heroes and leaders in the community (Smitherman, 1977:76).

According to Thomas Kochman in his book, Black and White Styles in Conflict, blacks even relate to language in a more personal way than whites. Blacks present their views as advocates. They take a position and show that they care about this position. This stance is characteristic of the mode of predominantly oral cultures like that of present-day black community people.

Present-day whites relate to their material as spokesmen, not advocates. Truth or idea merit is intrinsic to the idea itself. How deeply a person cares is considered irrelevant to the idea's basic value. This accounts for white's impersonal mode of expression.

Because blacks deal from a point of view, they tend to disbelieve whites who claim not to have a point of view and therefore often accuse whites of insincerity (Kochman, 1981:20-22).

For many blacks, Standard English is not only unfamiliar, it is socially unacceptable. Quick fun will be made of anyone caught "talkin proper" in an all black group of people. According to J.L. Dillard (1977), "Findings lead to the conclusion that Black English, even though that of a severely 'disadvantaged' group, derives from a complex set of cultural transmissions and is maintained primarily by an equally complex set of social relationships and communicative networks."

Also even though black semantic terms may vary somewhat from region to region and to some extent within subgroups in the black community, the Afro-American's intuitive knowledge of black semantics, coupled with his or her participation in the common black experience, enables that person to interpret or translate any words, expressions, and idioms not heard before. Thus blacks from one community have no trouble adjusting to the black linguistics of another community (Smitherman, 1977:72).

It has been necessary for survival and black community solidarity for blacks to "talk that talk." Black English has changed over the past four hundred years, but it still isn't the same as white English. As long as we have two separate societies in contact and conflict, we're going to have two separate languages (Smitherman, in Essence, 1981:154).

SUMMARY

This study has examined the phenomenon of Black English survival from four aspects. First, structural influences on the language include, of course, the heritage of slavery from which it springs, but also the historical and continuing isolation of black people in what amount to ghetto situations. It has looked also at the foundations of the West African tongue and its oral roots rather than written ones, as well as the institutional racism present in society in general. All of these contribute to keeping black vernacular alive.

Second, rather as a reaction to or in spite of the structural causes, a cultural base exists with roots in West Africa and the endurance of the plantation Gullah language with

its attendant influence on Black English. Code switching, rather than a complete crossover to Standard English, seems to be the rule, while the media appears to have little influence on the black dialect due to the early age acquisition of language. Churches, as well, continue to maintain the language through spirituals and ritual responses.

Socioeconomic level plays a major role in the preservation of black dialect. Due to the historical racism in this country which convinced many that the dialect signalled low intelligence, many educators as well as employers consider Black English a sign of ineptitude. This attitude then serves to maintain blacks in a low social strata with only a comparative few, those who are able to master the art of code switching, reaching middle class.

Finally, reaching all the way back to a stubborn refusal by slaves to master the English language and the accompanying development of their own double entendres meant to confuse the slavers, Black English serves today as an identifier. It sets blacks apart in a way which they dictate and which is difficult to imitate. With their high value placed on the spoken word, the black community promotes a form of solidarity through their own form of speech.

That the creoles have been maintained as viable home languages into the latter part of the twentieth century in one of the most highly industrialized countries, despite the low esteem in which they are held, indicates something of their continuing vitality and importance for their speech communities

as living languages. Actually, Gullah may well serve as a symbol of ethnic consciousness among blacks (Ferguson and Heath, 1981:90).

Ultimately, the "language" is alive. It can be, by turns, lilting, grating, lovely, harsh, yet ever changing. And often there is no really explicit translation to Standard English that will convey the soul or emotion of a phrase.

CHAPTER TWO

ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

Education in this country was conceived to be the great equalizer. Unfortunately there is strata to this system which causes divisions and levels in that equality. Since young people in America all process into the schools at sometime or other, they are unavoidably influenced or stamped by their experience there.

Emerging in adolescence, young blacks can be seen to exhibit language traits that are both structurally and culturally based, socioeconomically influenced and consciously maintained. These traits, more often than not, erect road blocks in their paths to good jobs and wide acceptance intellectually in the society at large. The overall effect, rather than equalization, can become further separation.

This chapter will take a closer look at the endurance of Black English among adolescent blacks from the theoretical vantage point that it is structurally and culturally based, socioeconomically influenced, and consciously maintained. In this way, the study submits, a growing separation between the races is perpetuated through the youth of the culture.

BLACK ENGLISH AMONG ADOLESCENTS: STRUCTURAL ISSUES

Why do black students generally have more trouble learning to read than their white counterparts in middle-class schools?

According to Harvey A. Daniels, the breakdown is primarily attitudinal, not linguistic. He says that black children who enter schools with an effective command of their dialect may, by the end of their instruction in English, become confused about, if not hostile toward, the whole enterprise (Daniels, 1983:181).

With their language as the primary guage, Black English speaking youngsters entering schools with their enthusiasm for learning at its peak are often criticized, corrected and ultimately devalued. In America today, tragically disproportionate numbers of young blacks continue to be labeled "handicapped," "learning disabled," or "behavior problems." And many educators, instead of paying attention to documented language differences that may be interfering with the performance of these students in school, continue to think in terms of cultural deprivation and compensatory education (Orr, 1987:12).

Betty Lou DuBois asserts: "There is probably very little the schools can do to change the prevalent attitudes of the dominant group, since the schools are after all its agents, but they can cease promoting the belief that mastery of standard dialect insures entry into the dominant group."

And N. Nuru observes that societal attitudes attached to black dialect transcend the linguistic competence of that dialect, permeate the entire world of the child and affect the realization of the child's aspirations. She notes that these attitudes cannot be lightly dismissed or easily changed, and

that the reality for the child is that these attitudes later may serve as a basis for academic placement, education and employment (Starks, in Black English, Educational Equity and the Law, 1983:102).

A general concensus of opinion appears to be gathering that educational policies which fail to recognize the creoles as language varieties which are substantially different from those used in most classrooms may doom creole-speaking children to failure with academic subjects in large numbers (Ferguson and Heath, 1981:90).

An intriguing explanation of how Black English speakers are handicapped in the non-English areas as well is detailed by Eleanor Wilson Orr in her book Twice As Less: Black English and the Performance of Black Students in Mathematics and Science. Orr contends that language may indeed play a part in shaping conceptual thinking. Her data suggests that language may shape the way one perceives quantitative relations - specifically, that the way a Black English speaker may understand certain Standard English expressions of quantitative relations can affect his or her understanding of those relations. That language may affect the way one thinks in math and science is significant (Orr, 1987:11).

Orlando Taylor, Acting Dean of Howard University's School of Communication, identifies the challenge that must be faced: "All you have to do is look at the national statistics on school achievement in language arts for minority children to see the traditional approaches don't work. ...Children who

come to school speaking nonstandard English score at or near the bottom. When that happens, you either have to assume there's something innate in blacks that prevents their learning Standard English, or something inadequate in teachers, or - the one I argue for - that teachers have in their hands an approach that is inappropriate" (Orr, 1987:12-13).

BLACK ENGLISH AMONG ADOLESCENTS: CULTURAL ISSUES

"It's possible to characterize a peach as a deficient apple; in fact, it's the only conclusion you can come to if you judge the peach by the apple's standards."

So states recognized linguistic authority J.L. Dillard in his book Black English. His defense of the dialect continues to explain that there may be many reasons, most of them cultural, why a child may appear "non-verbal" in certain contexts.

A child's speech community prescribes for him not only the grammatical forms of his language but also the times appropriate for the use of that language. Even if two children from two subcultures are both terrified by strangers, one may be culturally conditioned to react with a lot of talk and the other to take refuge in complete silence (Dillard, 1973:33).

In her study of black students' work in math and science, Orr became convinced that underlying their difficulties was the language the students spoke. There was explicit evidence that these students were using one kind of math function word, prepositions, in a manner different from other students; and their misuses were different even from the misuses with which

she was familiar.

It is commonly believed that the ghetto child watches television constantly and therefore should be especially proficient in the Network Standard dialect. But one cannot interact effectively with a television set, and the ghetto child, like all other children, learns more language from his peers than he does from any other source (Dillard, 1975:174).

The primary interference with the acquisition of Standard English seems to stem from a conflict of value systems. Actually, language may be looked upon as a system for integrating values. Identification with the class of people that includes one's friends and family is a powerful factor in explaining linguistic behavior.

There are also negative factors in the conflict of value systems. The adolescent peer group exerts strong pressure against any deviation in the direction of middle class standards. William Raspberry of the Washington Post Writers Group speaks of children from the black slums who resist what he calls the "enwhitenment" of Standard English, fearing to cut themselves off from their roots. A black youngster who speaks "proper" English may find himself in endless playground squabbles, ridiculed and even physically asssaulted, for acting "white."

A student may rightfully feel that the teacher threatens him as a member of his own group by trying to abolish completely the speech pattern that identifies him as a member of that group: this is the group that he respects, that awards him

prestige, that establishes his masculinity (Labov, in Shuy, Social Dialects and Language Learning, 1964:95-6).

In writing about the dilemma of black dialect in black advancement, William Labov, a linguist at the University of Pennsylvania, has noted: "Many educational programs have the effect of changing children's social behavior so that they can no longer keep the friends they used to have. This often happens when children change their pronunciation and their vocabulary and become socially marked as different from the rest. ...it should be possible to bring children closer to the systems used by other dialects without changing their personalities and their friendship patterns" (Quinn, "Linguistic Segregation", in The Nation, 1985:479-482).

BLACK ENGLISH AMONG ADOLESCENTS IS SOCIOECONOMICALLY INFLUENCED

As blacks move into the middle class their ability to code switch affords them the opportunity to move from Standard English to black dialect as the situation warrants. For most, Standard English all but replaces the dialect even in areas of family and recreation so that children of middle class families have Standard English as their first language.

But the pull of the black dialect is strong among the young. William Raspberry speaks of knowing boys, from homes where Standard English is routinely spoken, who work at learning what he terms "Ghettoese" to win acceptance by their black peers. And since this language is the first one learned in the lower class areas of the community, its continued survival clearly rests on this socioeconomic influence.

Negative attitudes toward the language held in general by the educational system can actually contribute to the lower class economic situation of Black English speaking youth.

Linguistic researcher William A. Stewart speaks to the problem: "a.) A major problem area in the academic performance of lower-class black students in the public schools has to do with language: the acquisition of school-language skills, and performance on language-based academic achievement tasks. Differences between the kind of English used in school and the kind of English these students often speak outside of school seem somehow to constitute a major source of this problem.

b.) A linguistic examination of the vernacular speech of lower-class blacks reveals a rule-governed dialect (of remarkable consistency throughout the United States) which does exhibit structural differences from Standard English. These differences are limited in number, however, and appear for the most part to be functionally trivial."

Stewart further states that the only serious attempt to resolve this conflict has been to attribute the performance problems described in (a) to purely attitudinal factors such as hostility to Black English usage on the part of teachers, and the rejection of standard English by black students. This, he asserts, can actually create language-usage problems even when the actual linguistic differences are trivial (Stewart, in Garcia, Ofelia, & Ricardo Otheguy, 1989:274-5).

Most black Americans speak in a way that is distinctive, recognizable, and remarkably alike in various regions of the

country. It is worth noting, however, that many black scholars and politicians have spoken out against legitimizing the dialect or even acknowledging its existence. As early as 1971, Bayard Rustin condemned the "cult" of Black English, arguing that "reinforcing this consequence of poverty will only perpetuate poverty since it will prevent black children from mastering the means of communication in an advanced technological society with a highly educated population" (Daniels, 1983:151).

One of the greatest problems with the attacks on Black English has been the critics' insistence on drawing their "examples" of the dialect from the speech of alienated adolescents in inner-city ghettos - from street talk. To say that the language of a black sixteen-year-old gang member from the south side of Chicago typifies Black English makes as much sense as saying that the language of a white sixteen-year-old gang member from the southwest side of Chicago typifies Standard English.

To be sure, street talk does exist. It is the talk of young people who wish to separate themselves from the adult world, to manifest their defiance of authority and to disguise their conversation from unwelcome listeners.

If the disadvantaged black has a historically different variety of English from that of the mainstream-culture white, the question remains open as to whether lack of communication is part of the racial trouble in this country (Dillard, 1972:25).

BLACK ENGLISH AMONG ADOLESCENTS IS CONSCIOUSLY MAINTAINED

Language as a possession? Language as a badge? It manifests in youth especially who grab at phrases to justify everything from exclusivity to murder.

"It's a black thang, you wouldn't understand."

"Folks up! Folks down!"

Words given the special black semantic slant tend to lose their linguistic currency in the black community if or when they move into the white mainstream. Thus new words must be coined continuously.

This dynamism is due, in part, to today's rather extreme chauvinism among blacks, which says all whites are lames and their use makes it stale OR possibly due to the historical inimical relations of blacks and whites which dictated the necessity for a black linguistic code (Smitherman, 1977:70).

The condition of servitude and oppression contributed to the necessity for coding or disguising English from the white man. Since slaves were forced to communicate in the white man's tongue, they had to devise ways of speaking that would be powerful and meaningful to the black listener, but harmless and meaningless to any whites who might overhear their conversation. (Miss Ann = derisive white woman & ofay = foe)

This tradition of a coded dialect of English whose meaning is veiled from whites persisted even after slavery and can be seen as the underpinning of urban black "cool" talk, which often functions as a register of exclusion around whites (Smitherman, 1977:47).

The vocabulary of Black English speakers is essentially the same one employed by speakers of Standard English. A relatively few words are used exclusively in the black dialect. Many of the unique word items of Black English tend to be appropriated for use by younger white speakers, and some eventually pass into standard or near-standard usage.

ex. hip, right on, rap.

Other terms do remain within the black dialect without appreciable seepage into local white speech.

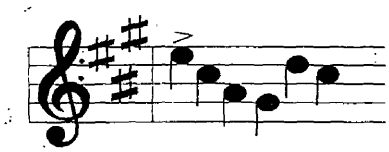
ex. ride = car / crib = one's home

The fact remains that because a given speaker may not have learned, or does not typically use, certain English words, these words are not necessarily placed outside of his mother tongue. All people who speak a dialect of English are capable of adding to their personal word stock whatever items become necessary (Daniels, 1983:158).

Young people are the keepers of the tongue. They bring it to school and hold on to it even when it isn't in their best academic interest. By adolescence, it is a personal possession - it binds and protects, tests and becomes a vehicle for prestige and status. And always it lurks there just under the monosyllabic front of many, and bursts forth in all its wealth of vocabulary, pitch, tone, intensity, and color in some.

This verbal ability is a basic survival tool for most black youth. And while they may not always be willing to write it, they all can speak volumes and understand the "talk" with more than ears - with heart and soul as well.

CURTIS By Ray Billingsley



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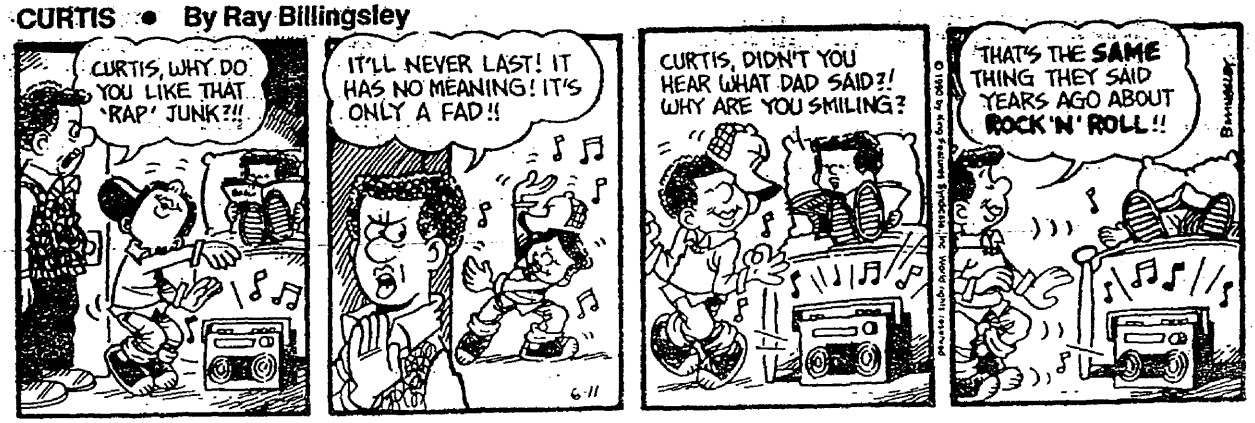

CHAPTER THREE

BLACK ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION AS EXPRESSED THROUGH "RAP"

Unintelligent? Uneducated? Unfeeling? An inner-city student leaves behind an unbidden scrawl on a discarded sheet of paper in the classroom one Monday morning. A classmate had been shot and killed in a senseless argument that weekend:

It Don't Make You

Fronting your life
  Stanging in a gang.
Your homies are with it
  So you hang.
Life becomes fun
  When you're holding a gun.
Slaying brothers and sisters.

Rap is essentially poetry. It pervades the adolescent community today, and an amazing number of youngsters from the inner-city are displaying a wizardry with words that would leave their English teachers scratching their heads in wonder if they knew.

Quicker than Kryptonite
  Bad as a satellite
  Doper than crack itself
I soar like the second flight
  So swift I should say the least
Who's soothing the savage beast?
The giving of living,
  The only promise is to decease.
You die of a second wind
  And never to breathe again
  Since Flint's the facility
North side I am living in.

I hit like a killer,
  Crash! My posse is kickin' ass.
We prey on the others,
  Yet the brothers keep dying fast.
  You shoot without thinking first,
Creating a colored burst.
A Negro's in jail,
  What the hell
  Let him pay the purse.
You're down for a homicide
  From your gun a brother died.
Say, "Niggers is niggers,"
  That's the truth,
You ain't never lied.
A killer created hate,
  Degree of the second rate.
He's coming, you're running,
  You hear "Boom!" there a second late.
  A bull on the rampage
With horns and a twelve guage.
                -Ace A.K.A. A.B.
                 Flint, MI 1990

Rap emerged when disc jockeys at clubs and parties in the South Bronx began improvising rhymes over the instrumentals of dance records.

Early rap mixed party chants with the braggodocio of black oral traditions like the blues, jailhouse chants and the dozens, a primarily male game of escalating insults.

In its constantly changing slang and shifting concerns - no other pop has so many anti-drug songs - rap's flood of words presents a fictionalized oral history of a brutalized generation. Current rap embraces jokers, nice guys, bawdy fantasies, story tellers, romantics and political activists (Pareles, 1990:D2).

BLACK ADOLESCENT RAP: STRUCTURAL ISSUES

Both in slavery times and now, the black community places high value on the spoken word. The persistence of the

African-based oral tradition is such that blacks tend to place only limited value on the written word, whereas verbal skills expressed orally rank in high esteem.

From a black perspective, written documents are limited in what they can teach about life and survival in the world. Many blacks are quick to ridicule "educated fools," people who "done gone to school and read all dem books and still don't know nothin'!" (Smitherman, 1977:76).

It therefore stands to reason that any new medium of communication that would grow out of the black experience would rely on the spoken word.

Chuck D of the popular black rap group, Public Enemy, says rap or "hip hop" records have become black America's TV station, the only medium that reflects the full spectrum of black experience. In the last few years at least, they have become so much more: an explosion of musical and verbal language more volatile and immediate than anything television could handle. If there is a devastating literature being created in the United States right now, it is probably on rap records, where ingenuity, obsession and daring clash head on, spewing words and grammar in every direction and spawned by the historical treatment of blacks levied by American society (Malone,1988:58).

Rap's roots are solidly planted in political fare. The earliest rappers such as the Last Poets and Gil Scott-Heron, chronicled ghetto life with pointed lyrics and poignant observations.

There's political rap and party rap, drug rap and gang rap, street rap and rock rap. Critically acclaimed rappers like Public Enemy and Ice T. deal with drugs, gang warfare and inner city blues.

"It's Like That" hammered in rap's ability to strip down urban life and repaint it in the most unromantic shades. In fact, many in the music industry are concerned that the current emphasis on party rap may take an edge off the genre and the positive messages many of its acts are presenting (Graff, 1989:D1).

The language of crime that runs through rap music is not crime as the rest of America understands it. Rather than portraying crime as a dark space of unreason, barbarism, and savages outside the well-lit realm of civilization, hip hop's gangster boogie contends that there is no distinction between Us and Them, between the law-abiding citizen and the law-breaker. As Ice T. says, "All business is a crime, it's just a matter of what's legal."

In the message raps of the early eighties, crime was portrayed as a social evil. They have been replaced today by a literature of crime as a metaphor for total possibility: crime as an image of a life without limits, where pleasure becomes more acute as it becomes more criminal.

What we find here is that criminal imagery in rap does not oppose the mainstream. Instead it creates a vicious, supercilious caricature of mainstream values, with all the liberal cant about honesty and fair play, truth and justice,

brutally shorn off.

The rappers' gangster imagery is, in the phrase coined by French writer Jean Baudrillard, "hyperconformism:" the simulation of the mechanisms of the very system that excludes them (Owens,"As A Metaphor," 1988:52).

BLACK ADOLESCENT RAP: CULTURAL ISSUES

In the black culture males have historically been the champions of storytelling. Men were expected to be skilled speakers as well as dancers and singers in the African villages of the Igbo, Yoruba and Ibebio. Women seldom engaged in any such activity in the company of men.

Within the Sea Islands as well as within certain African communities, only women who are elderly or held in fairly high social esteem can participate in such activities without fear of censure (Jones, 1987:38-39).

Almost as if an unwritten law forbids it, girls today rarely participate in the reciting of raps. It is veritably a male-only activity. Once in a while a female will give it a try, but it is rare and certainly unexpected.

The rhythmic signifying of the genre can be traced back hundreds, if not thousands of years, to the verbal patterns of West African storytellers known as griots. These musician-entertainers traveled among the Wolof society of what is now Senegal and The Gambia, entertaining their audiences with stories chanted to the accompaniment of a five-stringed instrument known as the halam.

The 1960s and '70s saw the rap cauldron start to boil.

James Brown and his "endless groove" soul stylings, complete with his hipper-than-thou spoken funkiness, would influence rap for all time. Black disc jockeys, influenced by griot style and that particularly rhythmic form of insult known as "playing the dozens," began to improvise extended monologues on their shows.

The Last Poets released their first album in 1970, and rap was truly under way. The Poets were four youthful New Yorkers whose angry, black nationalist verses made them underground successes in 1970 and 1971.

Next, Gil Scott-Heron, jazz musician and singer, set a Last Poets poem to music in 1975. "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" brought the rap genre up from the underground and onto America's radio stations.

Finally, in 1982, rap sprang into full blown maturity with Grandmaster Flash's "The Message," a powerful anti-cocaine number that was verbally and musically sophisticated (Beale, 1989:B3).

Rap rhymes. Some of it is meaningful, some of it is nonsense, but it is always considered better and is more appreciated if it rhymes.

According to black linguist Geneva Smitherman, black rappers have an overwhelming preference for rhymes. Some examples she cites include: "See you later, alligator... After while, crocodile... Split the scene, jellybean... You dead, skillet head... I would if I could, but I ain't cause I cain't."

She adds that the most effective signifyin' and cappin' (to

be covered in the chapter on ritual insults) have rhyme as a prime ingredient (Smitherman, 1977:146).

BLACK ADOLESCENT RAP IS SOCIOECONOMICALLY INFLUENCED

To many listeners, rap is the sound of a threatening underclass. And well it may be.

According to a Frank Owen interview with legendary drummer Max Roach in Spin magazine, "Rap came out of the poorest areas of the cities; out of miserable education, out of miserable public housing. They didn't have the instruments to learn on and take home and play, they didn't have rhetoric classes to learn how to deal with theatre, they didn't have visual arts classes. And yet these people came up with a product of total theatre. On the visual side they came up with something erroneously called graffitti. On the dance side they came up with break dancing. And on the music side, because they didn't have normal instruments, they invented a way to create sounds with turntables. They came up with something that affected the whole world in terms of rhythm, movement, the spoken word and the visual arts" (Owen, "Hip Hop BeBop." 1988:60).

In 1987, Public Enemy exploded on the rap music landscape with their fiery and provocative debut album, "Yo! Bum Rush The Show." It was a searing attack on the conscious of its listeners with its message of black self determination. Songs with strong calls for black nationalism have caused some to label the group racist. But for lead rapper, Chuck D., the rage in their music is a means of survival. "We're out for one thing only, and that's to bring back the resurgence of black

power. But we're not racists. We're nationalists, people who have pride and want to build a sense of unity amongst our people" (Cooper, 1989:8).

Felipe Bourgois, San Francisco State University professor of anthropology and author of Scrambling, a book about street culture, says, "I see rap as reflective. What people should be scared about is the extent to which the songs reflect reality. That there is such unbelievable violence in these communities is a national tragedy, while the fact that people express themselves in terms of violence is part of American culture, a way of thinking that goes back to the Wild West" (Pareles, 1990:1D).

BLACK ADOLESCENT RAP IS CONSCIOUSLY MAINTAINED

Rap has as much to do with attitude as with conventionally defined musical skills. Rappers live by their wit - their ability to rhyme, the speed of their articulation and by their ability to create outsized personas through words alone.

"The skills you need to be a good rapper are the same skills you need to get ahead in mainstream society," says Bourgois. "You have to write well and speak well in a creative manner, which are exactly the skills you need in an information-processing city like New York. And rap is about making something of yourself - it's the American dream."

Put simply, rap is an affirmation of self. It might define that self as successful, well paid, flaunting status symbols like jewelry and cars. And often, it defines that self as a sexually insatiable guy with a touch of the outlaw - an

exaggerated version of the demeaning stereotypes young black men have grown up with.

"When you're faced with a stereotype, you can disavow it or you can embrace it and exaggerate it to the nth degree," said Henry Louis Bassett, professor of English at Duke University. "The rappers take the white Western culture's worst fear of black men and make a game out of it" (Pareles, 1990:1D).

According to Will Smith, better known as rapper Fresh Prince whose nickname is a modification of the better known Prince Charming, rap is part and parcel of adolescence in urban America today. "Grow up in any urban area, particularly a black area, and you're exposed to rap," he says. "You can't escape it. Rap is the urban music. Everybody on the street is a rapper or a deejay or a beat box. Hip hop is a culture. It's not just a music, it's a way of life. Rapping was natural for me because I've been writing poems and stories since I was a kid. I was good at it, so I kept at it."

Jazzy Jeff and Fresh Prince's big hit single, "Parents Just Don't Understand," is about an impetuous youngster whose transgressions include joy riding in the family Porsche. Prince explains that their raps are about everyday experiences in their lives. He says that every rapper talks basically about what are, for them, common occurences, but for him, the most real group is Public Enemy. "They say exactly what they feel, they speak their minds one hundred percent. What goes on in their lives everyday, what they see, how they feel - that's it. Themselves."

While Jeff describes their style as "pop, humorous," Prince seems to disagree with that label from a cultural identity standpoint. "Not pop," he says. "Definitely not pop. Wrong word...Our music is definitely one hundred percent geared to a black audience. The music that we make, it's coming from our background. It's real; it's us" (Levy, 1988:45).

CONCLUSION

Taken literally, the bulk of rap songs reveal adolescent attitudes toward women, who are often presented as either materialistic and cold, or easy sexual conquests.

Like other black literary and oral traditions, rap lyrics also involve double-entendre, allegory and parody. Some rap machismo can be a metaphor for pride or political empowerment; it can also be a shared joke (Pareles, 1990:2D).

Rap is still very much a black medium, but white middle-class teenagers are beginning to stack Public Enemy albums right next to Van Halen and Bon Jovi records. For most, however, the messages - often laced with pro-black, sexually explicit, sexist, anti-establishment, political, and increasingly, homophobic lyrics - are insignificant.

When rap first burst onto the airwaves, critics labeled it ghetto music, music that only the urban underclass could relate to and enjoy. Rap, they said, was a fad.

Nearly a decade later, that "fad" is bigger than ever (Christian, 1989:1B). Big money is being paid for top rap acts. MCA-Uni Records bought the contract of Erik B. and Rakim for $700,000. And after dragging their heels in the belief

that rap was a fad that would fade quickly, the major labels are now signing up rap groups (Holden, 1988:23B).

Everyone is getting into the act. From a literary point of view, it may actually serve to increase the vocabulary of the ghetto youths who seek more and more words with which to embellish their raps. Bourgois speaks of seeing people, high school dropouts, who carry around notebooks in their back pockets so they can compare their latest rhymes.

In an interesting sidelight on content, too few rappers seem to be able to resist making some sort of swipe at gays, often taking a detour in a song to do so and rarely suggesting any double meaning. It seems an unexamined prejudice.

Rap, however, will no doubt continue to reveal the tensions of the communities it speaks to. But with its humor, intelligence and fast-talking grace, it may also represent a way to transcend those tensions (Pareles, 1990:2D).

CHAPTER FOUR

BLACK ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION AS EXPRESSED NON-VERBALLY

In an attempt to view black kinesics from the four vantage points of structure, culture, socioeconomic level and as a consciously maintained buffer against society, it becomes clear that not all apply in an equal way.

Most kinesics are traced fairly easily as a culturally based facet of communication. There is some evidence that socioeconomic level plays a part and that body language is consciously maintained as well. It is the aspect of a structural base for body language communication that is more elusive.

However, the hypothesis that black dialect has a different base of development from other varieties of American English (even though it is similar to other varieties of American English and it shares many common features) can be extended to non-verbal communication patterns.

Specifically, kinesics refers to how people send messages with their bodies through movement, expressions, gestures, etc. It has been pointed out that these non-verbal patterns are a learned form of communication which are patterned within a culture, and that they convey a particular message (Johnson, 1975:298).

The isolation of the black population from other Americans

produced some differences in non-verbal communication patterns within the black culture. Historically, however, this specifically black culture has been ignored or misinterpreted.

The chief reason cultural differences are ignored, according to Thomas Kochman, is that blacks and whites assume they are operating according to identical speech and cultural conventions and that these are the conventions established as standard by the socially dominant white group.

This situation alone contributes in an insidious way to the division of the races in that neither really is conscious of the problem. It stems mainly from the general public's failure to recognize that black norms and conventions are very often basically different from whites.

A major share of responsibility for the societal view that blacks have no distinctive culture must be carried by social scientists who have generally promoted the view that African culture was all but destroyed by slavery. It was Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynihan who in 1963 declared, "The Negro is only an American and nothing else. He has no values and culture to guard and protect" (Kochman, 1981:8).

It is often charged that other nationalities have, over a few generations in this country, managed to assimilate themselves smoothly into the dominant society. It is then pointed out that the black American's failure to so assimilate is proof of that race's innate inferiority. However, a more logical explanation, that blacks, even after several generations, should retain their original ethnic patterns and

perspectives, simply speaks to the extent to which racial segregation has kept the black rural and urban community culturally insular (Kochman, 1981:14).

As blacks take advantage of greater opportunity they move further away from their cultural roots. But that is true for all of us no matter which boat we came here on. The overall point here is that if these cultural styles and methods of communication that are still viable and distinctive in today's black community are culturally based, then it follows that they may well have been perpetuated structurally.

When young black men bop down the street, their gait communicates a power idea - an image designed to give notice of one's intentions to harmonize whatever is necessary for one's survival (Kochman, 1981:131).

Young black males have their own unique way of walking. The walk is different from the brisk stride of young white males. White males swing both arms as they walk communicating a non-verbal message of presumed masculine authority.

Young black males walk much slower - more like strolling. The head is sometimes elevated and casually tipped to the side. Only one arm swings at the side with the hand slightly cupped. The other arm hangs limply to the side or it is tucked in the pocket. The gait is slow, casual and rhythmic. It is almost like a walking dance, with all parts of the body moving in rhythmic harmony.

While the black walk communicates presumed masculine authority, too, it also says the young man is beautiful and

invites female attention. Finally, it says that the walker is "cool;" in other words, he is not upset or bothered by the cares of the world and is, in fact, somewhat disdainful and insolent towards the world.

While this is a general discription including all the components that may be present in the walk, it is important to realize that each individual imposes a certain amount of originality onto the general pattern (Johnson, 1975:301).

The "walk" is used for mobility and to arrive at a destination. Sometimes, however, one gets the feeling that WHERE the young man is going is not as important as HOW he gets there.

A walk is also used as a hostile rejection of another person in a conflict situation. The way a young black male walks away from a reprimand given by an authority figure communicates whether or not the scolding had a positive effect or a negative one. If he walks away in a "natural" manner, then the reprimand was well received; but if he walks away with a "pimp strut" it signals rejection of the criticism and is, in effect telling the authority where to go!

Young black females also communicate a negative non-verbal message when walking away from a person in an authority role after a conflict situation by pivoting quickly on both feet and then moving briskly away (Johnson, 1975:300).

The young black woman may accompany this movement by a facial movement known as "rolling the eyes." This expression conveys an insolent, hostile disapproval of the person in the

authority role and communicates every negative label that can be applied to the dominant person.

The movement is very quick and is often unnoticed by the other person. Sometimes the eye movement is accompanied by a slight lifting of the head, or a twitching of the nose, or both. Rolling the eyes is more common among black females than it is among black males (Johnson, 1975:298).

Another eye behavior used by many black Americans is found in many West African cultures. This is the "reluctance" of many black Americans to look another person (particularly, another person in an authority role) directly in the eye.

In the black cultural context, avoiding eye contact is a non-verbal way of communicating a recognition of the authority-subordinate relationship of the participants in a social situation.

Note how "culture clash" can occur because of the avoidance of eye contact: in the dominant culture eye contact is interpreted one way, while it is interpreted in another way within the black culture.

Avoiding eye contact to communicate respect and acknowledgement of one's being in a subordinate role is a common pattern in Western Africa.

Reinforcing the avoidance of eye contact is a stance that young blacks take in a conflict situation. Often, in a conflict situation, particularly young black males will slowly begin to take a limp stance as the reprimand from the person in authority goes on and on.

The limp stance is a defense mechanism which non-verbally communicates: "I am no longer a person receiving your message of reprimand; I am only an object." Or it communicates: "My body is present, but my mind is completely removed from the present encounter" (Johnson, 1975:301).

Among the Sea Island storytellers a characteristic of Gullah and Igbo, Yoruba and Ibebio is that of seeming to tell the tale to only one person. The teller focuses on that one individual in the audience and ignores all others. He may even turn his back on the rest of the watchers. This turning of the back is fairly common in some West African communities and is apparently not a discourteous practice (Jones-Jackson, 1987:44).

In most Western cultures, turning one's back to another person is an overt sign of disregard or disrespect. In Sea Island communities, however, one can observe this behavior in churches or other gathering places. Two men will often sit on each end of a church bench in such a manner that their backs are turned slightly away from each other. During the entire course of a sermon, they will turn around only to nod agreement to each other, to say, "Amen," or just to recognize each other's presence before resuming their former positions.

This behavior is observed more often in men than in women and children, though it has been seen in young boys during storytelling events in Nigeria and on the Sea Islands (Jones-Jackson, 1987:45).

Turning the back can sometimes be seen in a black audience.

When listening to a speaker, members of the black audience will often shift position in their seats to slightly turn their backs to the speaker to non-verbally communicate confirmation and agreement with the speaker's remarks. This action always follows the first leaning forward slightly bent over to show non-verbal concern or unsureness about what the speaker is saying. At the moment when they understand or agree with the speaker, they will shift in the seat to slightly expose the back (Johnson, 1975:305).

It has been pointed out that black males often turn their backs to another participant in a communication situation. This action always communicates a very friendly intimate message. This gesture - turning one's back to another - can be observed when black males greet each other as well. The non-verbal message is probably: "Look, I trust you so much that I unhesitatingly place myself in a vulnerable position in greeting you."

Another pattern that is common when black males greet each other is for one to approach the other person, verbally greet him, and then stand during the initial stages of the greeting with the one hand cupped over the genitals. The non-verbal message here is unclear; perhaps the youth is communicating that he is so sexually potent that he must subdue or "rein in" his sexual potential since it is seen most often when the conversation concerns sexual exploits or when the other person is a young female (Johnson, 1975:304).

Another interesting bit of body language can be observed

about a group of young black males. When assembled in a group, the periphery of the group continually fluctuates. The group moves in and out toward and from the center. When something particularly interesting or funny is said, one or more of the participants will turn his back to the center of the group and walk away with great animation to non-verbally communicate his confirmation of what has been said and his recognition of the creative way in which it was said.

Another non-verbal pattern easily noticed in black male group discussions is the way males punctuate laughter. Often, when something especially funny is said by a black, the audience will raise a cupped hand to the mouth and laugh. The hand is not placed actually over the mouth; instead, it is held about six inches away from the mouth as if to muffle the laugh. This action - the cupped hand in front of the mouth - is common among West Africans. The non-verbal message is that the audience has acknowledged the particularly witty statement of the speaker.

The black rapping stance is a kind of stationary "pimp strut." It is the pose the young male takes when talking romantically to a young female. It looks as follows: first, he does not stand directly in front of the black female but at a slight angle; the head is slightly elevated and tipped to the side toward the female; the eyes are about three-fourths open; sometimes, the head very slowly nods as the "rap" is delivered; the arms conform to the "pimp strut" pattern - one hand may be half-way in a pocket while the other arm hangs free; finally,

the weight of the body is concentrated on the back heel (in the "rapping stance" the feet are not together but are positioned in a kind of frozen step). The black female will most often listen to this "rap" nonchalantly with one hand on her hip (Johnson, 1975:303).

Body language lately can be confusing. Certain clothing styles take on a sexual connotation that lacks both style and allure. "Sagging," while definitely an intentional thing, is the wearing of one's trousers at or below the buttocks' midpoint giving the illusion of ill fit or unkemptness.

The most obvious conclusion since it can't be all that comfortable, is that it could be psychologically indicative of a desire to draw attention to that area of the anatomy.

The very newest rage is sagging without underwear. A current music rap is said to extol the disdain of underwear, which possibly accounts for this behavior.

Currently, a widespread and often dangerously violent message is spread both intentionally and nonintentionally by the wearing of certain colors. Primarily red and blue, colors - boosted by the movie of the same name - encourage or give license to mayhem in the name of a color. That patriotism would run so deep!

CHAPTER FIVE

BLACK ADOLESCENT COMMUNICATION THROUGH RITUAL INSULT

"The street is where young bloods get their education. I learned how to talk in the street, not from reading about Dick and Jane going to the zoo and all that simple shit. The teacher would test our vocabulary every week, but we knew the vocabulary we needed. They'd give us arithmetic to exercise our minds. Hell, we exercised our minds by playing the Dozens" (H. Rap Brown).

The Dozens is the most common name for the verbal dueling described by H. Rap Brown, though its precise name differed from community to community. In Baton Rouge where Brown grew up, for instance, the Dozens referred only to verbal contests which focused on the adversary's mother; Signifying was the term describing contests where the adversaries themselves were the subjects of verbal abuse. In Chicago, games of verbal insult are called Sounding in general while the Dozens is a specific variety which involves broadening the target from the adversary to his or her ancestors, relatives, and, especially, mother. Sounding and the Dozens can consist of either direct insults, "sounds," or indirect insults, "signifying." In Oakland, California, the game is known as Sounding or Woofing, in Philadelphia as the Dozens, Sounding, or Woofing, in Washington, D.C. as Joning, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, as

Screaming, in parts of the West Coast as Cutting or Chopping, and these terms do not begin to exhaust the list. In Flint, for example, the most often used term is "panning."

Wherever they exist and whatever they are called, these verbal contests - which I will refer to most often as the Dozens since it seems to be their oldest known name - involves joking relationships in which two or more people are free to insult each other and each other's ancestors and relatives either directly or indirectly. The mother is a favorite though not an invariable target. A group of onlookers is generally present, audibly commenting upon the performances of each player, judging their relative abilities, inciting them, and urging them on. Within the permitted boundaries of the Dozens, ritual insults are challenges not to one's honor but to one's humor and verbal ingenuity.

Though the Dozens can end in physical violence, it is not the planned or even the preferred climax. The Dozens is an oral contest, a joking relationship, a ritual of permitted disrespect in which the winner is recognized on the basis of verbal facility, originality, ingenuity, and humor. Linguist William Labov calls it a speech event with a well articulated structure (Levine, 1977:346).

The Dozens constitutes still further proof of how highly verbal ability is regarded by blacks. The man of words, Roger Abrahams observed in his study of black folklore in Philadelphia, was an important member of the male group whose ability with words was as highly valued as physical strength.

"Concern with verbal art," Claudia Mitchell-Kernan concluded in her analysis of black speech behavior in Oakland, "is a dominant theme in black culture" (Levine, 1977:349).

BLACK ADOLESCENT RITUAL INSULTS: STRUCTURAL ISSUES

The existence of such joking relationships as the Dozens is neither random nor accidental. Their longevity and pervasiveness in black American culture are related to the importance of the functions they perform. As all play does, the Dozens entertains; as much play does, it has a number of latent functions as well. It is, and has been, an important training ground for the development of verbal facility in a group in which oral culture has played a central role and which consequently holds verbal ability in high regard.

Emphasizing that the dialectic of insult characterizing the Dozens is confined strictly within the group, John Dollard reasoned that the Dozens has been a vehicle for deflecting aggression away from the white world, where it was dangerous, into a permissive channel within the black world, where it would have few serious consequences (Dollard, (1939), in Levine, 1977:355).

Searching for a more culturally specific explanation, Abrahams focused upon what he considered to be the intense Oedipal and identity problems of black adolescents who, having matured in a strongly matrifocal system, needed to find some means of exorcising the influence of the mother. In this quest, the adolescent "creates a playground which enables him to attack some other person's mother, in full knowledge that

that person must come back and insult his own. Thus someone else is doing the job for him, and between them they are castigating all that is feminine, frail and unmanly" (Abrahams, (1962), in Levine, 1977:356).

The difficulty with Abrahams' emphasis upon explanations featuring matriarchy and identity crisis among adolescent black males is that it leaves too much unexplained: Why the Dozens has been so popular among girls and women who seem to attack the mother figure with as much enthusiasm as do boys and men. Why, if the primary purpose of the Dozens is the exorcism of maternal influence, such male figures as fathers, and brothers are also so often the subjects of abuse. And, finally, why throughout most of its history the Dozens has been popular, both in its contest form and its sung versions with adults as well as adolescents. William Labov has shown how pointedly specific the purposes of the Dozens can be: to remind someone of their social place within the peer group; to relieve tension by transforming a personal conflict into a ritual one (Labov, (1968), in Levine, 1977:357).

It is possible to identify two overriding functions of ritual insult: The first - training in verbal facility - has been mentioned. The second - training in self discipline - has been too widely neglected. Almost every student of the Dozens has commented upon the fact that any resort to physical reprisal is a sharp break with the rules governing the ritual and is considered to be the mark of a loser who has exhausted his or her verbal skills and lost control.

The inculcation of this kind of discipline is one of the central objects of the ritual insult. Developed at a time when black Americans were especially subject to insults and assaults upon their dignity to which they could not safely respond, the Dozens served as a mechanism for teaching and sharpening the ability to control emotions and anger; an ability which was often necessary for survival. If the Dozens has become more exclusively a vehicle for adolescents and juveniles in the past few decades, this development certainly is more than casually related to the expansion of opportunities for black adults to express their discontent more openly in a variety of ways (Levine, 1977:357).

BLACK ADOLESCENT RITUAL INSULTS: CULTURAL ISSUES

In 1939, when he published his pioneer essay on the Dozens, John Dollard judged it impossible to say whether the Dozens was borrowed from Western European culture and refashioned by Negroes in the New World, whether it was adapted from the native African heritage, or whether it was independently invented by American Negroes. Today, as then, the origins of the game remain obscure. Still, there is no question that institutionalized ritual insult was well known and widely practiced in the African cultures from which the slaves came. Although such insults were most frequently characterized by indirection, allusion, and metaphor, direct insult was certainly not unknown.

In 1856 the Reverend Leighton Wilson reported from West Africa that "More fights are occasioned among boys by hearing

something said in disparagement of their mothers than all other causes put together." Institutionalized insults and ancestor derision, then, were well known in Africa as they were in many cultures including those of Europe (Levine, 1977:350).

While the the Dozens, as a term, covers a wide variety of ritual insults, some definitive discussion of the fine-line differences is helpful in pointing up the culturally specific nature of this activity.

To begin with, according to William Labov, Sounding is always thought of as talking about someone's mother. But other relatives are also mentioned - as part of the speech for variety in switching, or for their particular attributes. In order of importance, one can list the opponents relatives as: mother, father, uncle, grandmother, aunt. As far as the number of sounds is concerned, the opponent himself might be included as second most important to his mother, but proverbially sounds are thought of as primarily against relatives (Labov, 1972:322).

Signifying can be both light and heavy; that is, a way of teaching or driving home a cognitive message but without preaching or lecturing.

Example - lightweight siggin' or cappin':

"You so ugly look like you been hit by a ugly stick."

Example - heavy siggin':

Reverend Jesse Jackson, merging sacred and secular siggin' in a Breadbasket Saturday morning sermon:

"Pimp, punk, prostitute, preacher, Ph.D. - all the P's -

you still in slavery!"

Not as venomous as sarcasm, though it includes elements of sarcasm, the point of all effective heavy signification is to put somebody in check, make them think about and hopefully correct their behavior (Smitherman, 177:120).

Signifying can also be hinting or letting on that one would be interested in knowing something. And it can also be used to imply something that is negative or accusatory. For example, it could be considered signifying when you bring back a Diet Coke to a friend who asked for Coke. It can be taken to imply that they need to lose some weight (Kochman, 1981:103).

Bragging and boasting in the black community each take on different forms and serve somewhat different purposes. These two forms, while not specifically insulting in nature, are common communication styles that surface in many of the same arenas as ritual insults. They are therefore deserving of at least brief mention.

Black boasting is always humorous, not to be taken seriously and often obvious exaggeration. The same features mark black boasting in the West Indies, according to Karl Reisman.

Bragging, on the other hand, is a serious form of self aggrandizement. There is an element of accountability involved. Claims have to be justified, whether they pertain to ability, possessions or social status.

Bragging about <u>proven</u> ability is okay, but not unproven ability. Also bragging about possessions and social status is not okay in the black community since neither is unique to the

person and has no communal potential (Kochman, 1981:63,68).

BLACK ADOLESCENT RITUAL INSULTS ARE SOCIOECONOMICALLY INFLUENCED

As implied previously, ritual insult is not as prevalent today among adults who have greater opportunities available to them thus lessening the need for such psychological outlets. It remains, then, for the youth of the black culture to perpetuate this communication style, probably for many of the same reasons as before mentioned. The streets remain the verbal training ground.

On the streets, woofing's purpose is to gain, without actually having to become violent, the respect and fear from others that is often won through physical combat. To accomplish this it is necessary to create an image of being fearless and tough, someone not to be trifled with.

But simply to recognize the activity as woofing is not to say that blacks can necessarily tell whether those woofing will actually do what they propose. That is because the facade is often the same whether the person is serious or not. Perhaps this is why blacks consider any shift from verbal posturing to overt movement a more reliable gauge of imminent violence (Kochman, 1981:49-51).

William Labov noted that, in the verbal insult game of sounding, to deny, mitigate, or excuse a sound (verbal insult) is to admit the accusation is true. Thus, when David, a member of the Thunderbirds, a Harlem, N.Y., gang whose speech Labov studied, hits on a real failing of Boots' stepfather ("Least my

father don't be up there talking uh-uh-uh-uh-uh-uh!") Boots responds to it and thereby concedes it to be true. ("Uh - so my father talks stutter talk, what it mean?")

Within the framework of sounding, as elsewhere within black culture, a defensive protestation of an accusation communicates to others that a vulnerable part of the person's psyche has been touched, leading to the proverbial conclusion that the truth indeed hurts (Kochman, 1981:95-96).

One of the most important differences between sounding and other speech events is that most sounds are evaluated overtly and immediately by the audience.

The primary mark of positive evaluation is laughter. A really successful sound will be evaluated by overt comments. Another, even more forceful mode of approving sounds is to repeat the striking part of the sound oneself.

Negative reaction to sounds are common and equally overt. The current most frequent is "Tha's chatty!," but sounds are also disapproved as corny, weak or lame.

These evaluative remarks are ways of responding to the overall effect of a sound. There is also considerable explicit discussion of sounds themselves. In the case of a traditional sound, like a rhymed dozen, one can object to an imperfect rendition.

There are also two very different uses of sounds: 1) ritual sounding and 2) applied sounding. In ritual sounding the sounding is done for its own sake. Applied sounding involves the use of sounds for particular purposes in the midst of other

verbal encounters (Labov, 1972:325).

In recognition of the recent hoopla surrounding the censure of Two Live Crew, some mention is in order of the place of obscenity in the Dozens.

Obscenity does not play as large a part as one would expect from the character of the original Dozens. Many sounds <u>are</u> obscene in the full sense of the word. The speaker uses as many "bad" words and images as possible - that is, subject to taboo and moral reprimand in adult middle-class society.

Many sounds are "good" because they are "bad" - because the speakers know that they would arouse disgust and revulsion among those committed to the "good" standards of middle-class society (Labov, 1972:324).

BLACK ADOLESCENT RITUAL INSULTS ARE CONSCIOUSLY MAINTAINED

Ritual insults are a peculiarly black language phenomenon. Arising out of the oral tradition, this activity entertains, romances and elevates some while, at least, transmitting a sense of belonging and community to those quick-witted enough to participate without flinching. Rules apply here though often unspoken and always unwritten.

In looking at the ingrained cultural aspect of the Dozens, an opposition between ritual insults and personal insults emerges: - a personal insult is answered by a denial, excuse, or mitigation, whereas a sound or a ritual insult is answered by longer, almost standardized sequences.

Responses to the Dozens or sounds are so automatic and deep-seated that we must presuppose a well-formed competence on

the part of participants to distinguish ritual insults from personal insults. On the face of it, it does not seem easy to make this distinction.. It is a question, among other things, of how serious the antagonist is: does he want to start a fight? Does he mean it? Are people going to believe this is true? (Labov, 1972:335).

The danger of sounds being misinterpreted as personal remarks cannot be overstated, however. There is danger in a ritual sound which is not obviously untrue. In dealing with strangers, it is considerably harder to say what is a safe sound, and there are any number of taboos which can be broken with serious results.

Generally speaking, extended ritual sounding is an in-group process, and when sounding occurs across group lines, it is often intended to provoke a fight (Labov, 1972:341).

Young black people use the term "play" in standard phrases to an extent that necessitates explanation of the word from their particular point of view. Ex. - "He plays too much!" "I'm just "playing."

The concept of "play," as in verbal play, implies an ability to tell the difference between real and serious and "play." For "play" to function as play, Roger Abrahams says "there must be a sense of threat arising from the 'real' and 'serious' world of behavior." To create this sense of threat, play must approach the border of real, give the impression of "for real" even though it is not (Kochman, 1981:52).

For blacks the boundary between words and actions is clearly

marked. Loud abusive talk can constitute "just an argument," or if there were threats, insults and/or challenges to fight, they might be "woofing." Fighting does not begin until someone actually makes a provocative movement (Kochman, 1981:46).

The most common specific verbalism of the Dozens is the simple retort: "Yo momma!" (Also "Ask yo momma!")

Played for fun or viciousness - and it can be either - the Dozens is a competitive oral test of linguistic ingenuity and verbal fluency. The winner, determined by the audience's responses, becomes a culture hero (Smitherman, 1977:128).

All of the black speech acts - argument, woofing, cursing, sounding, boasting, rapping, loud talking - have animation and vitality as key attributes. As Paul Carter Harrison has noted, "The word MUTHAFUKA, however profane, owns more force than the tentative invective of GOSH DAMN! when trying to harmonize the vitiating effects of a depressed mode." One might even consider animation and vitality necessary attributes for these speech acts to qualify as black (Kochman, 1981:107).

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

It is not hard to see that an ongoing linguistically racial enclave exists in this country. For many of the reasons covered here, as well as the obvious fact that blacks are easy to exclude because of their identifying color, not much has really changed in terms of unprejudiced acceptance of blacks into America's mainstream. The development of code switching in black speech attests to the degree in which this mainstreaming has actually taken place, in that only a handful of blacks who are considered middle class, practice it.

Even in the most solid working-class areas, there are many isolated children who grow up without being members of any vernacular peer group and a steadily increasing number of individuals split away from the vernacular culture in their adolescent years.

The Black English vernacular currently refers to such isolated individuals as lames. To be lame means to be outside of the central group and its culture; it is a negative characterization. Nevertheless, it is evident that the lames are better off than members in many ways. They are more open to the influence of the standard culture, and they can take advantage of the path of upward mobility through education, if they are so inclined or driven. They are less open to social

pressures to fight, to steal, or take drugs (Labov, 1972:258).

Obviously the potentially pivotal role of the educational system cannot be overstated. In speaking of the attitude of teachers of deprived Negro children, Ralph Ellison said the following: "One uses the language which helps preserve one's life, which helps to make one feel at peace in the world, and which screens out the greatest amount of chaos. All human beings do this. And if you have one body of people that have been sewn together by a common experience...and you plant this people in a highly pressurized situation, and if they survive, they're surviving with all of those motivations and with all of the basic ingenuity which any group develops in order to remain alive."

In essence Ellison's two points are that, first, human beings cling to the language which makes it possible for them to control chaos and to survive in the situations in which they find themselves; and, second, the way to teach new forms or varieties or patterns of language is not to attempt to eliminate the old forms but to build upon them while at the same time valuing them in a way which is consonant with the desire for dignity which is in each of us (Creswell, 1964:71).

In any discussion of language and ethnic interaction, it might appear that the focus is upon cultural assimilation. However, sharing a language does not guarantee interaction, and it is also clear that cultural assimilation cannot be considered without reference to social structure.

It is maintained that people will align with different

groups as a result of rational choice with, for example, language being seen as facilitating or blocking access to particular wants, goals, values, or utility functions.

Alignment or non-alignment with the language group can be seen from two perspectives, that of maximizing material and social gains on the one hand, and minimizing security risks as well (Williams, in Giles, 1979:57).

According to Thomas Kochman, blacks and whites are caught up in a power struggle in which the social acceptability of black language and cultural patterns remains the central issue. Cultural differences, he says, are often treated simply as an irritant, not otherwise receiving the attention they deserve in themselves. As long as the struggle over social parity for the cultural patterns of blacks is unresolved, in all likelihood this will continue to be the case (Kochman, 1981:160).

There remains a general view of black speech as a crude and inadequate imitation of Standard English that cannot serve the cognitive, educational, social, or occupational needs of its users.

However congruent the critics views may be with each other, and no matter how widespread their acceptance by the standard-speaking public, these ideas about Black English are nevertheless wrong on most counts. While mastery of some form of standard may be an economic asset to many black people in this society, organized attempts to change the language of black people have had, and will continue to have, counter-productive results (Daniels, 1983:152).

As long as the general public retains those prejudices against black people which have infected the study of Black English, no semi-standard we can teach them will offer our students much protection against the bigotry they may encounter later in life. Nor will such teaching diminish the differences between black and white dialects of English. For as long as the black and white communities in this country are largely separate - geographically, socially, politically, and economically - their languages will continue to be different. Black English will not disappear, no matter what the schools or other social insitiutions may do to eradicate it, to modify it, or to punish its users (Daniels, 1983:182-3).

In terms of the increasing separation between the races, if our present economic situation continues we will undoubtedly see more and deeper rifts develop. The majority of blacks, who are already low on the economic scale, will surely slip further down. In an economic slump, when society begins looking for scapegoats, it won't have to look too far. In a three-year study by William Labov, some fairly dire predictions were made about the future of black/white relations in America. The study found that English spoken by blacks and whites in the United States is becoming increasingly different, making misunderstandings between the races more likely, and adding to the isolation of the black poor in our large cities. "Our results can be seen as signals of the dangerous drift of our society toward a permanent division between black and white" (Labov, 1986).

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

A LEXICON OF LOCAL SLANG

Language as a possession?

The following lexicon of local Flint area slang was collected over a four year span and is representative of the changing evolution of the "talk." As a teacher of communication in an inner city alternative education program, I regularly assign a student-generated list of slang words which is then translated to Standard English. It is this assignment from which this list was gleaned. Some things stay the same - many change and many different phrases or words are often applied to the same thing depending on the degree intended.

Ain't shit up - No; doesn't matter
Bucket - Old car
Bump - Music (loud); piece of crack cocaine
Bowl' - Crack cocaine pipe
Bud - Marijuana
Blowed - High on drugs or alcohol
Big cheese - Big behind
Bust the move - Leave
Brew - Beer
Bussin' - Nice; cool
Boys, The - Police
Bent - Intoxicated
Bouncing - Leaned back in a car with music on
Beaming up Scottie - Smoking crack cocaine
Buzzing - High on drugs
Brim - Hat
Booming - Making money selling drugs
Boulders - Rocks of crack cocaine
Busted - Caught doing something wrong
Break it down - Explain
Biting - Copying
Clockin' dollars - Making money
Chill out - Calm down; relax
Chatty - Fake; unreal; boring
Crib - Home
Clown you! - Beat you up!
Crew - Friends
Catch a case - Get in trouble
Chronic - Drug addicted

Cut - Home
Cap - Shoot someone
Cable - Fat gold chain
Comin' correct - Legitimate; truthful
Dogg - Man
Diss - Put down; devalue
Double Rs - Cocaine and marijuana mixed
Drapin' - Wearing lots of gold chains/jewelry
Def - Good; sharp
Eight ball - Olde English 800 beer
Five-O - Police
5000 G - I'm finished
Fresh gear - Nice clothes
Fresh - Nice; cute; smooth
Floating - High on marijuana
Funky - Nice
Freaky live - Bright patterned; eye-catching
Fronting - Challenging; embarrassing publicly
Fiend - Person addicted to crack cocaine
Friendly - Overly nice; soft
Forty (40) - Beer
Flexing - Having sex
Flat out? - Really?
Freak-nasty - Very sexually active
Freaks - Girls (negative connotation)
Fire on - Hit
Fall out - Become unconscious
Gank - Trick, fool
Geeked - High on drugs
Gat - Gun
Grippin' the ride - Driving a car
Getting paid - Earning money
Giggin' - Dancing; partying
Hoopty - Car
Homeboy, homie - Friend (male)
Homegirl - Friend (female)
Hood - Neighborhood
Holler - Communicate; talk
Hook - Police
Hurtin' - Broke; no money
I'm all up on that otha level - Past that stage
Illing - Acting strange or silly
Jockin' - Pestering; bothering
Joint - Jail
Jammie - Gun
Juiced - Killed
Jump, The - A social club
Jay - Punch
Juke - Fake; trick
Jam - Song; music
Janky - Ugly, out of style
Kicks - Shoes
Knot - Large roll of money (bills)

Knock - Fight
Kick it to the curb - Get away from me
Let you tell it! - You're lying
Lampin' - Relaxing
Locals - Police
Mackin' - Talking to a girl
Mugg - Person
Mack daddy - Telling a girl what to do
Not half steppin' - Never been beat
N-dub - Northwestern High School
Old miss - Mother
Old dude - Father
Old bird - Mother
Out there bad - Doing wrong
On a mission - Having some private business
Peep this - Listen
Posse - Gang; group of friends
Pac-man - Police
Perpetrating - Faking
Push it to me - Give it to me
Props - Recognition
Payin' off - Having an odor
Rollin' - Selling drugs
Rock - Bed; piece of crack cocaine
Ride - Automobile
Sackin' - Going with someone for their money only
Sqo? - Really? Is that so?
Square - Cigarette
Sack - Crack cocaine
Straight - Fine; ok
Sweating me - Following me
Set - Meeting place; hangout, usually the street
Swass - Looking good
Seditty - Act haughty
Sprayed - Shot
Skeezers - Girls
Snappin' - Losing one's temper
Thirty-third (33rd) - Never
Threads - Clothes
Trippin' - Strange
Tripping out - Acting silly
Throw down - Fight
Vapors - Being envious
Word - For real?; I agree
Wasted - Drunk
Weed - Marijuana
What up? - Hello
Wild thing - Sex
Yo - Hello
You on? - Do you have any drugs?

Use of negative terms to express positive values occurred in West African languages and appears today in the street or jive

talk of young black Americans in particular. Words common to other dialects of English, such as BANJO, TOTE (for "carry"), OKAY, JAZZ and JAM (as in jam session), are also posited as being of West African origin, though there are debates surrounding each of these items.

Somewhat less debated is the influence particular speech events or styles of talking developed by blacks have had on the talk of young adults using almost any dialect of English.

APPENDIX B

RAP FROM THE STREETS

by Ace, a.k.a. A.B.
Flint, MI. - 1990

I

I'm making millions and billions
But you can just call it cash.
Cremate your body to dust,
And rip your bones into hash.
Stone mackin' my money,
Hard breaking the bridge,
This is an avalanche falling
Over Devil's Ridge.
You want to battle the boss,
Another sucker is tossed.
Go check your data bank,
You lose, whose information was false.
It was yours for trying to take out
The undertaker.
I'm not a knuckle-cracking nigger,
I'm a back breaker.
So when you see me, flee,
Or you'll be found in the street,
Not bleeding from a bullet,
Just brutally beat.
I was bound to throw down
And with the quickness I kill,
Got a steady settin' pace,
Always willing to ill.
Was A.B. a hard rocker,
North side Flint town;
On the wheels will be my D.J.,
Just plain low down.

II

Hell raising, not grazable,
Highly unfazable,
Stand like the Lord
And my cloud reads praisable.
We're a force, tell your source,
The other crews we wreck,
AFO is total chaos in full effect.
Hip hop won't jump until my posse start,
And if you leap like a slob,
You die in the dark.
You understand what I'm saying?
Displaying my rhyme,
Kicking beat after beat,
Rocking all of time.
I'm hateful and hideous,
Yet I'm dreadful in black;
All the fellas is jealous
Cause of the dollars I stack.
The tremendous exclusive beat
To blend with the recipe
Is dangerous and deadly
So you don't want to mess with me.
This demon is devious,
Taking over your soul,
Shoot you dead in the back
And put your blood in a bowl.
This is a message interpretated,
Too hard to be penetrated,
You biters of writers
Or sucker MCs disintegrated,
I'm deadly as deep sleep and
Watching you weep, Creep.
The girlies keep on screaming
Just to get a sneak peek.
So the villain just chills,
Turn your back and I kill.
No one rolling the set,
Ace is ruling the hill.
Your mind is complicated
And you don't understand,
But you're waking in the sand
Of a dead man's land.

III

(Continuation of rap appearing in Chapter 3 of this study)

Slayed from the slaughter house,
Brought up with the Mafia,
Struck, destruct, redestruct,
There's no stopping ya.
The distance of origin to a point
Where the graphs cross,
Start smoking, never stoppin',
Played around, now you die, Boss.
Utterly defeated to a point which
You shiver first,
Played with, tortured, teased,
Till your body burst.
Bleeding from the brain,
Never, ever to play again.
Wishing it was instant,
Now you slowly shall die in pain.
You refused the rules
On this ground he created,
So you lost your life
When the dice separated.
Now you feel the force of the blast,
See the fire.
Once it's set, it's wet
And the drip makes it higher.
One sight to see
As you stare to the star,
Soon self destruction
Begins the new war.
So the cry gets louder
And we take our stand,
On this field which we killed
For the sake of the other man.
Now the brother is brain washed
And this begins slavery,
You yell you want awards
In your act amongst bravery.
So we say "Peace" in our strike
For the brother man,
But one big bomb's in the mind
Of the other man.
As you say "No" when you go
For the kilo,
I put you to sleep
Once I creep like a widow.
I'm a man-killer, body bag builder,
Tipsy off the Eight
Cause the crew hate Miller.

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